

The Beach House

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Don't remember when the sun came up. You can't really stop the watch at the exact moment anyway, can ya? The sun just creeps up on you every day. Noticing that sharp yellow light crawlin' all around makes me blink and feel more awake, at least for a minute or two.

"Looks like there's going to be another day, then," I say to my brother, Crackle, sitting in the passenger seat. He makes a noise that sounds like he's agreeing. He's tired too, but not as tired as I am. I've done all the driving through the night, and it's gotten so I'm finding myself swerving the car in stupid wobbles across the long straight roads just to give myself a bit of variety. Looks like there's going to be another day. That's what we used to say when we were little. Someday the sun wasn't going to rise and there wasn't going to be another day.

Finding it hard to focus. My mind is wandering. I twitch the wheel back and forth like I'm stretching my legs and reach over to fiddle with the half-busted radio. There's not much reception out here. That's a good thing, it mean's me and Crackle are getting out where there ain't too many people. Only get the occasional broken sound of local news reports and I don't want to listen to any of that. There's no good news here. I consider putting on the one piece of music Crackle and me have in the car 'The best of the Hoodoo Gurus', but it got so I'd played it on repeat so many times that halfway during the night it sounded like the damn songs were talking right to me, and that had freaked me out, so I'd shut the bloody thing off. It was the only music we have in the car - Crackle had bought the album from a random shitty little service station a couple of years back and never expanded our collection.

Like I'm doing every couple of minutes, I check under my seat with one hand, then turn to look at the stuff in the back seat and to see if there's anyone behind us. It's gotten to be a bad habit I can't stop, like a religion or superstition or something, like crossing yourself all the time.

Geez, I hope we're going the right way. We must be. Me and Crackle don't have time for getting lost right now.

It probably stinks in the car, but I don't notice it any more, even though the floor is covered with burger wrappers and those little hat-shaped holders for hot chips and fries that get greasy quick. There are a lot of empty tinnies too. I know booze puts most people to sleep, but for me it's always kept me awake, like coffee. Doesn't make me sharp or anything, and Crackle doesn't like the idea of getting pulled over and me blowing over the alcohol limit, which would leave us pretty proper screwed, but it keeps me up for a couple of extra hours when I might have completely flaked away. One of us has to stay awake. We need to keep moving.

I look over at Crackle. He's leaned against the side of the car, face smushed up all stupid and funny with his eyes closed, breathing slowly. Like always, his nose whistles every now and then. That goddamn nose whistle has been annoying me on car trips for years. It'd be one thing if he just started a regular proper snore, but his nose is all random about when it sounds like a tiny kettle. I've had years of that stopping and starting nose whistle and it has never stopped annoying me, which is tough when you're stuck next to Crackle for hours in car trips across the country. It gets on me damn nerves, let me tell you. That's always the way with brothers, just like

with families. The little things piss you off - the noise they make when they eat, the way their leg won't stop twitching when they're sat down, the clicking sound their jaw makes. Me and Crackle have been having punch ups since we were little tackers over all sorts of silly shit, but that's how it's always been and that's part of having a little brother. I can't remember a time when that little pain in the arse wasn't around in me life. Ain't been a lot of other things that have stuck around, and me and Crackle have had bigger and rougher fights since we used to hit each other in the back seat of the car as Mum told us to shut up and behave, but he's been there most of the time when things have gone tits-up, even if it was sometimes his own damn fault, and he's here now stuck in the car with me now that we've both screwed up on an epic scale.

The sun isn't messing around now. It's coming up proper bright and sharp. Makes me start seeing spots in front of me bloody eyes. I have a quick look at myself in the rear-view mirror. Looks like a poor bugger who needs to sleep. Too damn bright for someone who has been up all night.

I ask Crackle if he's seen my sunnies. He just grunts. Useless. I fumble around next to the seat and dig in a pile of change and old half-finished packs of chewie and other crap and my fingers snag a pair of sunglasses. Cheap scratched aviators with one wobbly arm, but it's a bloody relief to get something between my eyeballs and the sun spearing through the windscreen.

Much better. I can see properly now without squinting the whole time.

My seatbelt is getting hot on my chest, so I undo it and it flicks back into its little placie home. Crackle can't stand it when I don't wear a seatbelt, but he looks pretty out of it right now, and anyway, we've bigger things to worry about than road safety. We just gotta keep going. Get somewhere safe. Get to the old place by the beach.

Starting to sweat pretty badly now. It's just a damn heatbox in this old car, and it's just gonna get hotter. The Beast, Crackle and I call our car, and it's a tired old broken-down animal if ever there was one. It grinds and coughs all the time and reminds me that we never got around to getting it serviced. Never had the time and the money, and never thought we'd be relying on the old junk heap as a getaway car. I pat the hot plastic dashboard. C'mon you complaining old girl, I think, just keep on going for a while longer, just until I can get us there.

There's been an itch at the back of my head for a while. Nerves. If I've taken us the wrong way down these roads and got us lost in the middle of nowhere, we're stuffed. Everything looks the same out here - wild scrubland all pale green and yellow from the sun and twisted half-dead gum trees and little views of the sea off to my left you see every now and then far off through the hills and trees. And empty blue sky that goes on forever and ever.

It's been a hell of a long time since we came down this way, Crackle and me. Not since Mum was still around. She used to make us both sit in the back because she had to concentrate on the road and couldn't stand all the noise me and Crackle made. Course, we got so bored sitting there we used to bash each other up and carry on and make Mum scream anyway.

Geezus. All this road looks the same.

I twist my head to look at the tarp over the back seat and put my hand under the seat to check the thing is still there. Amen.

No sign of them now, but I'm not dumb enough to think they've given

up coming after us. These guys don't give up easy and they want me and Crackle bad for what we done. Gotta get where they can't find us.

Christ, I'm thirsty. I have a kick around the mess and the only thing I can find to drink is a dented tinnie of beer. I open it with one hand and have a swig. It's tastes like warm piss, but it's better than nothing. I offer some to Crackle but he doesn't want any.

The Beast had got a pretty good petrol tank and if we keep moving, we're okay, but it ain't gonna last forever. Wish the dials on the dashboard worked properly so I knew how much we had left, but I can't remember when they ever worked right. I sneak a look into my packet of ciggies. Only about four left. I pull one out and push the car lighter in next to me. That's one thing that works proper in the Beast. Nowadays people only use them things to charge their phones and whatever. Reckon the Beast could charge a whole room worth of phones from that little electric lighter.

The coil pops out all red and I light up, making sure I roll down the window. The air blowing in is already as hot as inside the car, but I got to have the window down when I smoke. Crackle can't stand the smell of ciggies. He's a bit of a health freak - gyms and boxing and running and all that sort of junk. Never been my sort of thing. Can't see the point in all that. Never met a fitness-freak who looked happy. They're all tense and wild-eyed, just like little Crackle.

Taking a big drag on the ciggie feels good. Helps me stay awake. I try and blow the smoke out the window, but the wind just knocks it back inside and makes Crackle snort.

I take another swig of beer. It doesn't make me any smarter or nothing, but I can feel the booze getting in my veins and keeping my head up. Crackle ain't like me - the poor pissweak bugger has a couple of jars and he'll be nodding off, ready for beddy-byes. Too bad we don't have anything stronger, but I finished all the rum hours ago, drinking it down as the best of the Hoodoo Gurus on the player beat at my head. I think the rum bottle is rolling around somewhere in the back filled with my piss now. Once you've broken the seal, and there's no time to stop, you do what you need to, trying to get it all in there with a minimum of splashing all over the place. With the window open and the dry air whipping about the place I'm starting to get a whiff of the car again, all sweat and piss and farts.

Geez, I wish this beer was colder, but. Cold like we used to sneak down to the beach out here when we thought Mum wasn't looking. Not that she cared that much. She was probably happy just to get rid of us for a few hours so that she could have some peace and quiet. I'd find a bottle-o and buy the beer when Crackle and me was underage, 'cos I always looked older and they weren't too fussy around these empty parts. Happy just to get the business, even from a couple of kids looking to get smashed. We'd load up an esky with ice and cram as many beers as we could get our hands on and head down to the beach, getting our toes in the sand and just drinking away. And the cans would be cold and perfect. Nothing better than drinking away the afternoon together back then, watching the sea go back and forth, feeling like nobody was left anywhere but us.

It's a bloody relief when I finally see something I recognise. The old giant telephone is up there on the side of the road and I'm so pleased we're going in the right direction that I even slow down for a few secs to look at thing. It isn't one of those proper huge tourist things, the big phone, it's just some monument out by the side of the road with a statue of some bloke who helped put phone lines out through here or something. That's

how little this bit of coast matters, their big statue hero with his oversized phone is some guy who fixed the phone lines. The statue had been pretty dented up since we were last this way, and kids must have sprayed it with all sorts of graffiti. I think back when we had come down here, the phone man had been holding something up in his right hand, but somebody had broken that off, along with a couple of his fingers.

Yeah definitely the right way. Down the road past the old green rusted water tower and I can see the sea meeting the sky straight ahead. It's a right up here and then down a bunch of dirt roads so twisty and badly signposted, they'll never find us here. That's why Mum had liked the place on the coast so much. Good spot for her to lay low where she wouldn't be bothered. She'd stocked up the place good and there wasn't anyone else around for miles. No neighbours to bother us and she could set me and Crackle loose down at the beach or wandering off into the little town up the coast and she didn't have to worry about us getting into any trouble. There were some great rockpools down there near the house - looked like they must have been formed when the world first exploded with lava and earthquakes and that. Crackle had once found a whole bunch of rocks topped with some kind of metal from a million years ago, and we'd spent a whole afternoon trying to smash off a chunk to take with us. At low tide you'd sit there with your feet in a pool of cool salt water and look for little crabs scurrying about under the sand and seaweed in their own little world. Christ, what I wouldn't give to be able to walk into that cool ocean right now and to just float there like I weigh nothing and there's nobody for miles around except Crackle and me. I almost feel rocked backwards and forwards by gentle waves and luckily Crackle's stupid nose makes a whistling snort, because I realise I must have closed my eyes and drifted off for a moment and the car was edging towards the side of the road.

Gotta stay awake. Almost there. Gotta keep going. I punch myself in each leg as hard as I can, hoping the pain will keep my eyes open until we get down to the beach house and we're safe from them. My legs just feel kind of numb. I fish around for another beer, but that must have been the last can I downed before. I light another cigarette and touch the edge of my thumb to the electric lighter, just to get a little burn to stay awake. It gets my mind back on the road for a second but I can already feel sleep strangling me again and my eyes blurring over. I've also added another stink to the inside of the Beast, just a little bit of my burned skin chucked in with all the rest of the desperate goddamn smells in here.

Seems like something funny is happening with time now, like I can't feel it properly 'cos I'm too tired, because I reckon it was just then I started smoking the cigarette and already it's burned down to the butt and dropped ash all over my lap.

We turn past a set of three shops in a row, huddled up out there together near nothing else at all, and they look like they've be boarded up and closed a long time. You'd be a mug to try and make any money this far out on the coast.

"Y'remember that joint there?" I say to Crackle, "Used to be a bloody hairdressers and that place next door where we used to get chips and milkshakes? Caramel for me, and always banana for you, because you reckoned it was good for you. Yeah, those old milkshakes that come in the big metal cups. We was always trying to nick them for no good reason. Just thought they looked beaut. You remember, that, Crackle? Dunno what the third place was, but you got to remember Mum used to give us a bit of

money and tell us to nick off from the beach house but to make sure we didn't do nothing stupid? We met them girls there, 'member?"

What had their names been? Lil and June, I think. They'd been sisters, and me and Crackle had tried to chat them up. June has been around my age, and Lil was only a year or so younger than Crackle, and a real little beauty, a little crazy girl. They came out drinking with us once - a little sheltered spot we'd found when we'd been exploring where there was like a cave made out of thick trees and this shady open space stretched out under there and nobody could find you when you were out there. There was a creek running through it too, just a trickle, but we'd sit in the valley bit hidden in our tree cave, chugging beers with Lil and June and picking wild blackberries to eat and hoping we'd get to kiss 'em or maybe fool around a bit. One time, Lil had gotten so pissed she could hardly stand and she'd spewed everywhere, dark blackberry vomit right there in the creek floating slowly down. June was the responsible one, smart girl, I remember, and she'd had a gutful of us by then, but because Lil was all covered in blackberry chuck, we had to carry her down to the sea and wash her clean so the girls wouldn't get in trouble with their olds.

Christ, everything had been so nice and slow back then, never had any bloody thing to worry about for weeks at a time. Me and Crackle exploring and swimming and drinking and sleeping on the sand, and then home to Mum's spaghetti dinners.

Mum was always worried about snakes down at the beach house. Used to lecture Crackle and me about always keeping an eye out and making sure you stomped so the snakes would know you are coming. Out this way, if you was bit by one, Mum used to say, could be a good bloody while before she could get us to the hospital, and you'd wind up dead before you knew it. There was that one time Crackle had been taking a piss behind a sand dune and something had moved under his stream, and a little baby snake had wriggled out of there as fast as it could, while Crackle freaked out after all those lectures from Mum and fell over backwards, getting piss all over himself. It was hilarious, at least for me. Crackle had wet himself in both senses.

"Reckon the poor little crawler was more scared of you, ey, mate?" I say, "Imagine waking up from a nice sunny reptile sleep to find some little prick was pissing all over you."

I laugh, then realise Crackle doesn't have any idea what I'm on about.

Can't be too far now. I look at the shape under the tarp in the back seat and check the metal under my seat.

The old beach house had been a beaut. Not the height of architecture, mind, just a little wooden thing lying unseen in a deep dip surrounded by bush and not far from a scrabble through wild blackberry patches down to the sea. Mum had slept in the living room, and me and Crackle had shared the bedroom. I used to tell horror stories to the little fellah to freak him out at night, which worked real good when the wind would blow through the wooden slats of the walls. If a thunderstorm kicked off, that was even better. Mum would let us come into the living room and sit on her bed looking out the big window in the back over the porch, watching the lightning putting on a show for us out over the ocean.

There's a clunk and the sound of scratching stones and clumps of sandy dirt under the Beast's tires as I turn off the tarmac onto the tracks. No signs or nothing here. We're gonna be okay, Crackle. Gonna get back to the beach house. Then I can get some sleep. We're deep down in the bush, the

sun flashing through the gaps as the Beast crawls along.

My brain's not at its best right now, and cos I can't quite picture the path in me head, we end up stuck up a dead-end track a couple of times. I was backing up when the Beast stops dead.

Ah, Christ. Not when we're so damn close. What the hell is wrong with her? Have we run out of petrol? I turn the key and the poor sick Beast coughs, tired and wrecked and run down as we are.

"Come on, girl, come on!" I shout at the Beast and slap the dashboard again and again until my hand stings, "Don't bloody leave us here!"

With a lurch, she pulls herself back to life one more time and I whoop and nudge Crackle.

"Atta girl! Just a little bit further. You get us down to where we need and I promise we'll fix you up this time. Get us to the beach house and everything is gonna be better. Me and Crackle will fix you up good."

The car crawls on through the shade and the sun, squeezing down the winding trails until I saw the stone marker. It was all grown over with weeds and stuff, but it was just like I remember when were kids, when Mum would finally get the car down to that stone after a tough drive with us in the back, and she'd sigh with relief that we were finally there.

"Never seen such a beautiful hunk of rock ever, hey Crackle?" I yell, "Remember Ma used to say that, and we couldn't wait to fall out of the car and get down to the place? We've made it, mate. We'll be safe here. Nobody is gonna find us, and we can get everything all fixed up. Remember how crazy we thought Ma was back then, laying down all them tins of food and supplies, like we were going to have wait for the end of the world down here? We're gonna have everything we need now. Thank Christ for Mum's craziness."

Back then, me and Crackle were stir crazy from being stuck in the back for so long, and we'd go tearing off down past the towering gum trees to that little hidden dip where the house was, and Mum would shout at us to come and bloody help carry the shopping and gear in, but we couldn't think of anything but finally running free. I felt like that now, but first we had to get the car out of sight and set it near that brilliant little wooden house with its sunburnt paint-job, that beach house squat there and looking out to the sea.

The Beast chugs past the gums and for a second I don't understand and think I must have got it wrong after all this time. I must have gone the wrong way, because there's nothing down there in the dip. Nothing but a cleared area, a few rotting boards and the empty sky and sea.

No, it was the right place. I recognise the shape of it, but the beach house is long gone. Who the hell knows why they tore it down? Could have been gone years ago.

I want to cry, just like a little kid.

"No, Crackle, it ain't there, it isn't fucking there," I mumble.

Crackle says nothing and I try to remember the last time my little brother had said something. I take off my sunnies and lean over and his t-shirt is all wet and stained with blood. There's none of Mum's tins of food or medical stuff for Crackle. There's nowhere left for us to go. I don't bother to check the shape under the tarp in the back seat this time. I reach under my seat and pull out the gun, and me and Crackle just stare out towards that sea.